

# MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



Report #48, March-April, 1983

## Focus on Women Mystics and the Devotional Life

Recent issues of the *Report* have focused on personal growth and on a Christian approach to human relationships. As we have encouraged each other to expand our horizons, we have also realized the need for increased inner strength. This *Report* is intended to explore means of meeting this need.

We as Mennonites are more at home with the concept of "the devotional life" than with "mysticism". If by "mysticism" we mean something "over and above the ordinary graces given to all Christians," then the term probably does not apply to the Mennonite experience generally. But if we understand mysticism as Christopher Nugent describes it in this *Report*—as spirituality that is biblical, occupied with love and sanctification leading to unity in the church—then mysticism is our calling.

### Two Faces of Woman: Witch and Mystic

by Donald Christopher Nugent

According to an ancient prejudice, woman has a special affinity with evil. The rather general view of humanity in the primitive world was that, as Robert Briffault put it in his monumental study, *The Mothers*, "Women are all witches."

Whether in the biblical account with Eve, or in the classical Greek account with Pandora, it is through woman that evil entered this world. Tertullian, an early father of the church, went so far as to refer to woman as "the gate of the devil."

There was, of course, an alternative and elevated image of woman, most visibly descending from Mary, whom "all generations" were to call "blessed" (Luke 1:48). This was a root of one of our oldest myths—"salvation by woman." But this was not enough to check the misogyny that came to its climax at the end of the Middle Ages. And whether by Catholic or Protestant, women suffered most from the great witch craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Although mysticism is not a Mennonite household term, its elements of prayer, Bible study, and divine guidance are. These are central to the lives of our women both past and present. One of the challenges of compiling this *Report* has been to find books and articles which talk about the devotional lives of Mennonite women. To prevent this lack in the future and to encourage each other in our adventure of faith, we might perhaps designate a corner of the *Report* for journal entries of contemporary Christian women.

In the meantime, we offer this *Report* with its mix of historical research, personal reflection, and future projection. The book reviews are meant to aid our study and practice; the resource listings include books referred to in all the articles throughout the issue, as well as some additions by the editor.—*Esther Wiens, professor at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg and compiler of features for this issue.*

The present concern is not so much to revise as it is to reverse this ancient masculinist prejudice. That is, to advance that woman has a special affinity not so much with witchcraft as with what might be considered its opposite—mysticism. As the mythologies had it, the one sought union with the devil; the other sought union with God.

### Defining Mysticism

By "mysticism," then, I do not intend anything esoteric or magical, but rather the substance of our original spirituality: a spirituality that is biblical, perfectionist, charismatic (though not necessarily in any special or sectarian sense), love-centered, and unitive. Mystical spirituality is less centered on justification than it is on sanctification, less centered on salvation than it is on immolation. By immolation is intended a "sacrifice" (for example, Eph. 5:1). Such a spirituality is concerned not just with the worship of Christ but with the imitation of Christ, the mysterious and ultimately transcendent conversion into Christ.

It may be no accident that the book of the Bible that has inspired more mystical commentaries than any

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other, "The Song of Songs," is (regardless of its authorship) essentially the work of a woman, the voice of the bride. Her magnificent love is raised or sublimated by the spiritual masters to its highest level or potential—that is, union with God, or "mystical marriage."

### Mary: First Christian Mystic?

It has even been argued that the first Christian mystic was a woman: Mary. For did she not have even physical union with Christ? And did this not flow from her resounding "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), a formula that is essentially the same as the untranslatable *Gelassenheit* of the later German mystics?

This Mary of Nazareth was not (as a recent feminist writer, Marina Warner, would have it) *Alone of Her Sex*. She was simply first of her sex. Religious literature is replete with feminine mystics from the first great flowering of mysticism in the twelfth century—great personalities like Hildegard of Bingen, the Helfta nuns, and Beguines such as Hadewijch of Antwerp. Then came Julian of Norwich, a contagion of Catherine's like Teresa of Avila, and finally Madame Acarie, who communicated Teresian spirituality to the French religious renaissance of the seventeenth century.

The Reformation generally broke with the older religious communities of monasteries and convents—seedbeds of mysticism—and turned to the world, preferring an evangelical to a mystical theology. Still, a Protestant mysticism was perpetuated through element of the Radical Reformation, and is evident in Quakers such as Mary Pennington and "Philadelphians" such as Jane Lead. It may well have been experienced by Mennonite women, who were not likely to inscribe it in historical records.

But a problem of the Reformation was that the elimination of traditional church authority and of monastic institutions made discipline tenuous and mysticism suspect. With Protestants, something akin to mysticism would eventuate in Pentecostalism, in which women were always prominent.

One index of the prominence of women among mystics is the prominence of women among stigmatics. Stigmatics, of course, are considered gifted (literally "branded") with some element of the wounds of Christ. As Simone de Beauvoir recorded in *The Second Sex*, "Of the 321 persons having stigmata recognized by the Catholic Church, only 47 are men."

Another conceivable index (if indirect) is gender among saints. And Caroline Walker Bynum, in her recent and superb study *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, determined that "there were more female than male lay saints in the period between 1215 and 1500." My sense is that this continues in time in both Protestant and Catholic communions, and that it correlates with the differentiation of gender among mystics.

### Why Female Mystics?

Finally, why? Among the many reasons for the prominence of mystics among women I would select two. The first is one of the great and perennial themes of mystical literature—"the wound of love." And if this finds its greatest expression in Christ, still it originates in mystical literature with "the woman of Shula" of the Song of Songs, who is "sick with love" (2:5) and "wounded" (5:7). This wound is, if you will, a spiritual stigmata and—as adults are apt to discover—the purest and possibly the "best" part of love is in suffering.

My point is that women, suffering their historic disabilities, and suffering so often in silence, sublimated this suffering into mystical experience, into divine love and infused wisdom. The whole rhythm of depth spirituality is from "groaning" to "dancing," from the tree of our faulted parents to the redemptive "tree" of the Cross. The Easter liturgy remarks of "the happy fault" that led to this great day. This is obviously not to condone suffering, but to put it to work for us.

The second reason for the eminence of women among mystics is rooted in institutional history. That is, women were effectively excluded from clerical office. So if their spirituality could not find expression in clerical and official forms, it was likely to find it in charismatic and inward forms. In a word, in mystical forms. And if women, denied the choice, did not "choose the better part," the effect was the same.

Today the age-old disabilities of women are being dissolved and increasingly woman has a choice. Some extremists, the so-called "goddess feminists," intoxicated with the heavy wine of liberation, seem all but determined to vindicate the worst of the ancient prejudices of men, and have chosen to overthrow Christianity, excavating in its stead the primitive goddess.

But, if I might be permitted a parting moral: What doth it profit a woman to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of her man? Especially if he is the Son of God.

Donald Christopher Nugent teaches in the history department at University of Kentucky, Lexington. His book *Masks of Satan: The Demonic in History* will be published by Sheed and Ward, London, in 1983. The above essay is from a projected book, *The Feminine Mystic*.

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As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother, and he revealed that in everything, and especially in these sweet words where he says: I am he; that is to say: I am he, the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am he, the wisdom and lovingness of motherhood; I am he, the light and the grace which is all blessed love; I am he, the Trinity; I am he, the unity. . .—Julian of Norwich, *Showings*

# Mennonite Women and the Devotional Life

by Sarah Klassen

Among Mennonite women it is not difficult to find doers: parallels to Florence Nightingale, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Gladys Alyword are numerous and many of their stories have been chronicled for us.

*Full Circle*, edited by Mary Lou Cummings, and *Women Among the Brethren*, edited by Katie Funk Wiebe, are two volumes that contain a diversity of condensed life stories. Here are active women who pioneered unfamiliar countries, supported husbands in various careers, raised large families, baked endless loaves of bread, nursed their own sick and brought medical aid to undeveloped countries, involved themselves productively in church and community, and in some cases had energy left for writing letters and poetry. Their stories are fascinating and inspiring.

The writers of these stories point out the faith that upheld these women in their adversities and the glory they gave God in their successes. Indeed, many of their achievements would be unthinkable without strong spiritual resources, and these resources must come from somewhere, must be nourished. The spiritual pilgrimages of these individuals, however, are not chronicled in as great detail as the physical experiences. Much is left unsaid, very likely because of the delicate research that would be required.

From what is available in the books mentioned, in other biographies, and from writings they have produced, can any conclusions be drawn about the inner life of Mennonite women? Have their spiritual adventures been as lively as their physical adventures?

It is safe to say that we have not produced an abundance of mystics, in the strict sense of the word. Explanations for this lack can be suggested. A people who have experienced as much uprooting and dispersal as "us Mennonites" have had to be concerned with survival. Under such conditions, time and opportunity for the contemplative life might be an unattainable luxury.

## Fears about Mysticism

Furthermore, people who have laid great stress on community and "brotherhood" may hesitate to encourage the mystic who withdraws from the group to engage in extended solitary contemplation.

Perhaps too there has been a fear that mysticism can lead to error. Edna Beiler seems to reflect this in her personal testimony, "The Shining Threshold." Here she describes herself as a sensitive person inclined to retreat into the world of her imagination in favor of risking relationships with others. Of her spiritual search she writes:

*For awhile I sidestepped my problem by an excursion into Christian mysticism that created for me (once more) a kind of inner world. However, the faithfulness of the Lord kept me from being satisfied with an experience that had little effect on my outward actions. I developed an uneasiness—the Lord's warning*

*that I was heading in the wrong direction. (They Met God, p. 22).*

A clue to apprehensiveness about mysticism can be found in our history. Mysticism has been largely associated with the Catholic Church. So the dreams and visions experienced by many Catholics, notably women, might seem a dangerous departure from the "sola scriptura" position of Protestants (including Anabaptists). Knowledge of God and of God's will is not expected to come through special spiritual insight given directly and mysteriously by God; it is acquired through the word of God as read by the individual or taught in church and Bible school.

When Maria Miller Brown, missionary to China, had to choose in 1937 between returning to the United States with her teenage son and remaining in China with her husband, she read Matthew 10:37 and concluded: "Lord, I thank you. Now I know what to do. I will commit my child into Thy care and I will stay with my husband" (*Full Circle*, p. 55).

Such literal acceptance of scripture was typical of this missionary and of many of her sisters.

## Needs of Everyday Life

In communing with their God, Mennonite women have been practical, relating their petition and praise to the everyday needs of life. "O God, what'll I do? How can I raise my boys without a father? How can I feed them?" prayed Rosa King, a North Dakota pioneer, when she lost her husband (*Full Circle*, p. 147).

In "A Time of Terror," Elizabeth Regehr Barga describes the horror of a bandit raid on her Mennonite

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## Eucharist

*Into the gloom of Sunset  
Manor I carry two brown loaves    light  
as prayer    my morning's labor  
for the pale bent lords  
and ladies of this place    for a moment  
they revive    perhaps    break a piece  
eat    thank me with their tears*

*hurried footsteps interrupt us    eyes  
radiant with celebration    hair  
arranged by April    Marion  
bursts upon us with doxology:*

*The ice has broken in the stream  
beyond the park    one splendid crocus stands  
mauve in the brown grass    the sun  
shone warm along my back and all the trees  
in hope preparing resurrection green.*

*she should be wearing wings instead  
of rubber boots    I kneel  
to gather crumbs.*

Sarah Klassen

village in 1919. She reports that "we cried to God for help" and, when they had escaped the worst, "we thanked God for protecting us" (*Women Among the Brethren*, p. 146). These two statements might be a fairly accurate summary of the prayer life of those women who had to flee their homes, perform hard physical labor in Siberian tundra or tropical Chaco, and face violence and death. Even in less critical times, prayer concerns have no doubt been practical, revolving around immediate problems and joys.

### Helen Good Brenneman

Perhaps for most, God is experienced and worshipped in community. Helen Good Brenneman, a writer who for years has suffered from multiple sclerosis, testifies to this. In her book *My Comforters*, she gives credit to her friends and her family who have comforted and encouraged her, thereby enabling her to become a comforter of others. She recognizes the value of the Christian community in her suffering and faith.

At the same time, it is evident that her communion with God is very individual and that she has grown a very personal faith—a faith that believes in God's healing power but does not demand that the healing be immediate or physical. She has been able to comfort others not only because she knows pain and suffering, but also because she knows God.

In her testimony "God Is My Life," written before the multiple sclerosis, she sums up her Christian philosophy:

*I believe that every Christian must be a missionary, and must witness spontaneously in life and word. God has taught me over the years that this is not accomplished by feverish activity but by a quiet and vital relationship with God (They Met God, p. 31).*

Helen Good Brenneman's example demonstrates that devotion to God leads to service, even if one is confined to a wheelchair, and that this is possible within the context of Christian fellowship.

This relationship between contemplation and action is often evident in the lives of mystics. Catherine of Siena, for example, practiced solitary meditation even before she was a teenager. Then as a young woman she became active in public life, visiting prisons, nursing the sick, and rebuking both pope and king. And Simone Weil, a twentieth-century mystic, shared the burden of suffering worlds as much as her frail body permitted.

In the records of Mennonite women, little is said about their inner lives. More emphasis is put upon the results than upon the details of the devotional life. To what extent the details would be helpful for us to have for study and analysis is a matter for speculation. Every generation produces individual women whose walk with God is undoubtedly worth observing and emulating. Should one generation record its models for the next, or should each generation learn from its contemporaries?

Diaries and journals would seem to be natural sources of insight into private devotional lives, but few

such documents are available. Mennonite women may have kept journals but been too reticent to offer them to the public. With the current interest in writing and publishing family histories, this may change.

### Anna Baerg's Diaries

Of the diaries available, those of Anna Baerg (1897-1972), located in the archives of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, are good examples of worthwhile reading. Of particular interest are the entries of the first years (1916-1924), when Anna was a young woman.

Anna's life revolved around family and church community, but she often struggled in solitude with some tough problems. On a personal level, she had to face up to a physical deformity that depleted her energy and threatened to limit her choices for life. On a broader level, the unrest and violence caused by war and revolution threatened the Mennonite community and all of Russia. Anna's father's death made these problems even harder.

Her diary entries reveal an often painful search for answers to the question of suffering, as well as a longing for a clear purpose in life and for purity and righteousness. She asks hard questions:

*Why do some have so much? Why are things given so easily to some? (Nov. 17, 1917).*

*Oh God, why did you let me become like this? Why can't I be like other girls? Oh why? (Jan. 27, 1917).*

After the murder of the Czar, she writes:

*God knows how all this will end (Mar. 11, 1917).*

The questions surface again and again, but Anna's searching never leads to despair; there is always a turning to God in faith.

*Just be patient, Anna Baerg. He who called the world into existence and in whose hand rests the fate of individuals will surely have a wise purpose for you; so be patient and wait. He knows your restless heart and its deep longing. (Mar. 16, 1917).*

Many times Anna refers to experiences in nature: walking in the garden, admiring a starry sky, observing the changing seasons. In nature she found release from anxiety and close communion with God.

*I have just returned from the garden. How good it is to be outside in nature, as if one is closer to one's God. Is it because the traces of his might and wisdom of his love are so clearly evident here? Everything here that brings joy comes directly from his hand. Oh if nature, which is after all a creation, is so wonderful and glorious, what must the Creator be like! Then one understands the words "All in all." Yes, all in all—may he be that in my life too! Without him there is no joy, no peace, no love, no happiness, no strength, no life; but in him is everything (July 31, 1917).*

Not profound, perhaps, but remarkable, coming from a woman of twenty years facing an uncertain future.

The file also contains plays, essays and poetry which Anna wrote for special church occasions or because she

needed to set down her thoughts. Writing seems to have been, for this woman, both a reflective, therapeutic exercise and a way of serving. Nature images are frequent in her poems and the themes are similar to the diary themes: faithfulness, trust in God, suffering.

### **Simone Weil and Suffering**

Simone Weil, who was herself acquainted with affliction, writes:

*Often one could weep tears of blood to think how many unfortunates are crushed by affliction without knowing how to make use of it (Gateway to God, p. 102).*

Helen Good Brennen, Anna Baerg, and many of their sisters have learned through suffering to pay attention to Christ, and would agree with Weil that:

*There is only one thing that enables us to accept real affliction and that is the contemplation of Christ's Cross. There is nothing else (Gateway to God, p. 198).*

We may not have identified Mennonite counterparts to Simone Weil, but we have been given many devout

women who have practiced the presence of God without fanfare, using the powers gained through this practice to fulfill large and small responsibilities.

Traditionally, the position of the Christian woman has been one of "standing behind" her husband and family. When the image of a praying parent is invoked, for instance, it is usually a mother and not a father. We all know women whose lives show a kinship with the prophetess Anna, of whom it is said, "She never left the temple, but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37).

If this quiet aspect of kingdom work is something Mennonite women have faithfully pursued in the past, then it is a gift they will want to continue to cultivate as they increasingly take their places alongside, rather than behind, the men.

*Sarah Klassen is a high school English teacher in Winnipeg. For a bibliography of works cited in this essay, see the Resource listing at the back of this Report.*

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## **Discovering a Theology That Offers Authentic Celebration for Women**

*by Sandra Wiens*

What would a theology shaped by women look like? Where would it begin—with God? with ourselves? with our relationships to others? to the earth? Perhaps it would be cyclical with all of these as places to "begin." If we chose to explore our unique experience of God, what would we come to know about our own spirituality?

Throughout our lives, external authorities have taught us the meaning of being women. We've learned to know God through the family and through institutions. To be content with this, however, leaves us with an entire portion of our experience untapped. Unless this experience is validated, received, and celebrated, our theology is based on denial.

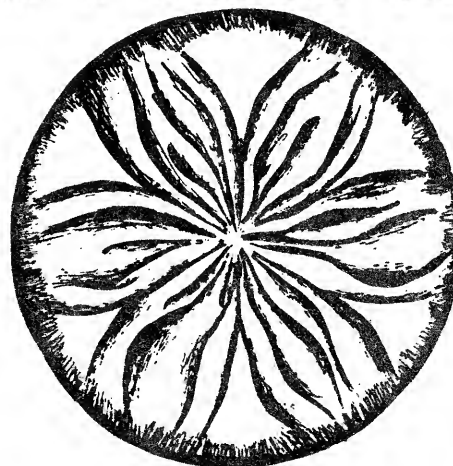
Denial of our emotions, our yearnings, our strengths in non-conventional tasks and of ourselves as women gives us a distorted experience of God. We must reclaim our experience, learn that communication with One greater than us is not an action we do, but itself reflects that One.

### **Facing Mystery**

To begin exploring our own experience of God brings us face to face with mystery. This mystery has several components. First, if we do not know with clarity who we are, what woman is, we are faced with the confusion of not having a solid base from which to begin asking our questions.

Second, we've been given ample descriptors of God imaged in male forms, but if we wish to know God as female, we meet a void—for our teachings have offered sparse female imagery.

Third, when we attempt to relate to the life-force without familiar symbols, we are drawn to depend on



The Sophia Plate from Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party." Sophia is an identification of "woman" with "wisdom" out of the Greek tradition.

our gut experience as valid information, and our "knowing" draws us into previously untested areas. We find ourselves moving from knowing through categories in our minds to knowing out of living experience. To move beyond our entrapment we must come to know this experience and trust it.

Mystery requires a response from us based on vulnerability, as weakness. This needs redefining. To engage in the task of self-discovery takes strength of vulnerability. We must be strong in order to enter the mystery to discover from our experience who we are; strong to discard our idols—attachments to self-definition through another person, institutions, ideas, symbols, rituals, roles. Our task is to move from clinging to the particular and to engage in opening ourselves to the experience of the unknown.

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## Reclaiming our Experience

As women we are unique. We have our own way of processing, gathering information, responding. We are in tune with our body's cycles and have the capacity to understand within ourselves the relatedness of all things.

In the second century, Christian theology began defining the human experience in terms of dualisms—body and spirit. Any dichotomy of spiritual activity on the one hand and bodily activity on the other leads to a false understanding of the relatedness of God and woman. We can counter this myth of a divided spirituality by reclaiming woman's history and woman's experience; by emphasizing a theology that centers on ourselves, our experience, God.

To change theology—to expand our God knowing—is not to lose faith. Faith is what moves from deep within us. It is the yearning within which draws us toward the struggle shape but it does not create faith. Theology therefore must fit our experience—must encourage and enable us, not confine us. If we are confined by our theology, then it must change. The concepts are not sacred, rather, faith is sacred. It is life itself.

If our theology is based on denial, it must change to enable our spiritual freedom, for ourselves and also for our communities. Our theology comes out of our communities. We experience God ourselves—we can learn to name Her in ways consistent with our experience. Then we can move to reshape our communities with what we know.

## About WOMENSAGE

The task is enormous and very risky. For a time women need a safe place to expand, to talk together about this. To give us a setting in which to enter into the process of discovery and change, WOMENSAGE has been formed.

WOMENSAGE is a resource center for Mennonite women, for women who want to ask the kinds of questions raised here, who want to test patterns and be together while moving into the less familiar. WOMENSAGE has been in existence for about six months. While the shaping is still in process, several methods for approaching our task have begun.

The WOMENSAGE publication, released quarterly, features the writings of women on theological issues, essays about our experiences and desires, poetry, and graphics. The work of women is circulated to enable us to learn from each other and feel supported in our questions and experiences. We will attempt to allow and respect diversity.

To address the personal search of individual women, WOMANSAGE offers retreats and workshops where women may gather together in safety to rest, be together, experience solitude. Topics for scheduled events include: "Images of Wholeness and Strength in the Christian and Pre-Christian Traditions," "Feminist Spirituality—What this Means for Mennonite Women," "Identity and Moral Development of Women," "Mennonite Women and the Arts."

The *Report* #45 (Sept.-Oct. 1982) featured an article by Brenda Stoltzfus—"Contemplation: A Seed of Strength"—describing our first retreat. The purpose of each retreat is to facilitate the movement for each woman from sole dependency on external knowledge to trusting our interior experience as valid as well. Understanding the strengths of both, we then move with courage toward integration.

The dream for WOMENSAGE is to be available to all interested Mennonite women. We are an international people and can benefit from each other. Perhaps a network can be formed between groups of women with like feminist concerns. Local groups supporting each other may contact others in different geographical settings to gain perspectives and lessen isolation.

WOMANSAGE is committed to helping women realize a variety of personal dreams. Dorothy Yoder Nyce is publishing a book of sermons by women. Chris Kauffman is creating a calendar celebrating Mennonite women. Let us know what projects you think deserve attention, or how we can be supportive of you. We have received a grant to prepare programs on feminism as a justice issue to take to General Conference churches in the Central District in 1983.

We invite women to bring their individual dreams to the larger dream. If you are interested in knowing more, being on the mailing list, sharing a dream, contact: Sandra Wiens, WOMENSAGE, Fatima Retreat Center, Notre Dame, IN 46556.

*Sandra Wiens is coordinator of WOMENSAGE.*

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## Who Needs a Support Group. . .

"We can help each other to discover. . . joyous freedom in Christ.

"We need to sing together, pray together, bear one another's burdens, be open and honest about our failures, forgive one another in our weaknesses, and in all ways carry on together like the family we are—the sons and daughters of God."

In the margin of my *Epistles Now*, beside this portion of James 5 (p. 163), I've added a few more verbs: "confess to," "listen to," "rejoice with," "hold each other accountable," "encourage," "declare to," "study with." And I've noted four times, in four different years, that this describes "our group."

Who needs a support group? Anyone who doesn't have one! If you don't believe that, it's probably because you haven't experienced the gifts of a group. These paragraphs are to encourage those who may be looking for ways to breathe life into their longings for such a group. Take heart; search on!

My life is different, and the difference dates from 1974, the year I became part of an emerging, loving, support group. Thank God, there's always been one since then, and among us we've walked a lot of miles. We've seen each other through births, deaths, marriages, divorces, illnesses, resignations, infidelities,

doubts, and many victories. In short, the gamut of daily life.

It's not easy or cheap, this kind of investing in each other, but the dividends are precious and priceless.

Where, you may ask, do I begin? Perhaps by checking the authenticity of your desires in the Light of God's Presence. Do you really mean business, and are you honestly willing to commit yourself to what you want God to show you? If you are, God will!

Next steps will involve trust, much patience, and true listening. God's timing may not be yours, but it will be right. Running ahead of God at this point bodes calamity. Keep listening; you'll know.

Rejoice when God brings you together with the first "faithful friend" you've been seeking, but then search for another. More than two is a safer group. Two could be a perennial pity party or a mutual admiration society; three won't. Six is certainly a comfortable number to work together, and eight might be a maximum. Our current six represent two different congregations, and our ages range from mid-twenties to late sixties.

Now, how to start? Why not ask what each person most needs from a group. A safe place (confidentiality)? Assurance of daily informed prayer? A place to lay down the too-heavies? Help in carrying them? Someone who holds you accountable? Help in discerning and interpreting God's signposts? Whatever your inmost longings are, try to declare them honestly. Then by God's grace begin to be God's people to each other.

Attendance at our meetings gets high priority and that's easy because these are times when we do truly *meet*. Being heard and understood is a need all of us have; to have that need met is to receive a great gift. We laugh a lot, but tears are just as welcome. Only some of us write regularly in journals, but all of us pick up pencils as one by one we review where we've been and where life is taking us next. Faithful, daily intercession for one another is part of our pledge.

We're all reading from the same missal, so the same scriptures have spoken to us each day since we last met. One of us (in rotation) gives simple direction to our meeting, calling us first to silent reflection, then indicating the "shape" of the evening. Always we pray.

Instead of one person giving spiritual direction to the rest of the group, we've paired off in twos. Some pairs exchange written reports of the inward and outward journey from one meeting time to the next. (They return the report next time, with marginal comments, questions, or suggestions.) Other pairs "check in" at lunch together, or just by phone between meeting times. We do really care where and how our partner-sister's life is going.

But we also recognize that need to have an outward mission, beyond our group. As we pray for each other, our hearts are drawn in many directions, to many needs and causes which our various lives touch. Perhaps the

day will come when we declare one of them our group's "mission." Meanwhile, our common mission is to pray.

You may wonder whether a group which asks such intense, primary commitment is displacing or replacing the church in our lives. No. Augmenting, supplementing, reinforcing, or even incarnating would be more accurate words.

Better still, a living, loving, support group can—in God's hands—be a microcosm of God's church in God's world.

*The writer of this article says, "I never 'wished to remain anonymous' before. But this time I don't want any reader to think that vital group life can better happen because of who the writer is or where she lives. It's equally available to all."*

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## **One Woman's Inner Journey**

*by Nancy Sprague*

Throughout my twenty-eight years of life I have been on a journey. Physically my journey has taken me from Africa to Pennsylvania to Chicago to Winnipeg. But this is not going to be my life story, nor my "testimony." Rather, I would like to share with you some of the movements of my "inner" journey and hope that it finds resonance in yours.

It is a journey which began in a troubled adolescent soul longing for release from herself and her uncomfortable insecurity. I kept waiting for life to begin, hoping that someone or some adventure would come along and rescue me from the reality of life. In vain I cried out for justification, struggling to do the right thing, striving to make an impact and be important, trying to solve everybody's problems.

I was like a dancer who is out of sync and clumsily darts here and there, falling down frequently and picking herself up again, reaching out everywhere to grasp something that will tell her who she is.

But a transformation has taken place! My dance has changed. God has come to me to be my partner. God sings the music in my ear and gently guides my movements. My dance is no longer futile, flailing, exhausting, but has become poised, graceful, settled, expectant, adoring.

How did this happen? Inside of me, mixed in with all the mess was a very special gift from God—the gift of an open seeking heart. I learned to ask God questions, and each answer would lead me to ask more. I gradually stopped looking outside of myself for answers and began to look within.

I developed some disciplines to help me in my desire to go always "further up and further in" (as the children describe their discovery of the upper world of Narnia in C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*.) This involved setting time aside for prayer, Bible reading, journal writing. It also included taking solitary walks, going on personal retreats, listening to music, and singing and dancing

alone in my room. Henri Nouwen talks about meeting God with open hands. If we seek, we will find.

It is difficult to put into words fifteen years of inner experience. Fortunately I have found others who can, and what follows has been profoundly influenced by such spiritual seekers as C.S. Lewis, Eugene Kennedy, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton. I have been able to mix their insights with my experience, and the result has been movement.

To summarize those fifteen years: there has been a transformation of the three emotions which seemed to engulf me the most—dissatisfaction, loneliness, and insecurity. God did not take these feelings out of my life. Rather, God showed me that these emotions can be good if channeled in the right direction.

As I turned my attention away from myself and onto God, He transformed these feelings into tools that build me up rather than destroy me. Dissatisfaction He revealed to me as longing. Loneliness became a peaceful solitude. Out of my insecurity grew my identity.

### Dissatisfaction—Longing

Longing is that “if only” feeling, the desire for something more. Often we put a name to it: “if only I were married”; “if only I lived a simple life in the country”; “if only my family would get along.” Or, it might be just a vague feeling, an aching for beauty, for peace and harmony, and rest from all our strivings. The feeling might be touched off by music, a beautiful sunset, or majestic mountains. Oh, to dance through a meadow of wildflowers!

When we experience beauty or peace, we want to hold onto it and bask always in its splendor. In his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis identifies this as a longing for heaven. It is a hunger placed in us by our Creator so that we would seek Him. Lewis writes:

*Our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be the healing of that old ache* (p. 12).

### Loneliness—Solitude

Longing is connected with loneliness. Have you ever experienced that feeling of having a family that loves you, lots of friends and activity around, but you still feel lonely? And you think no one *really* understands you and you wonder whom you can finally depend on?

It is our tendency to reach out to others, hoping they will fulfill our deepest longings and ease our inner pain. But they do not.

Henri Nouwen recognizes this when he states in *Reaching Out*, “no human being can understand me fully, can offer constant affection or enter the core of my being and heal my brokenness.” He compares it to the Grand Canyon—a deep incision that cuts into the surface of our lives but holds an inexhaustible beauty

for those who can tolerate its sweet pain (from *The Wounded Healer*).

Accepting this means receiving the gift of solitude—the place where we meet God. There we are nourished so we can reach out to others. For we do need love and relationships in order to thrive and grow. But we cannot ceaselessly strive to have our needs met, for we will never be satisfied. God has put an empty space in us for only God to fill, and happy is the man or woman who discovers that. It prevents a futile search. In God is our home.

### Insecurity—Identity

Insecurity takes on many forms—“Am I accepted and liked?” “Do I have anything to offer?” “Will I do a good job?”

I compare myself to others; I delve into fantasy; I brood over a mistake; I can't make decisions—all are symptoms of insecurity. There is much talk today about assertiveness and overcoming insecurity—find who you are, develop your potential. But from Thomas Merton I have discovered a much more profound solution to the problem of insecurity. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton writes:

*The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of others! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in somebody else's imagination as if that were the only place in which we could at last be real.*

Merton says we are made up of two parts—the true self and the false self. The false self is the woman I would like to be. The true self is who I really am. The false self has the starring role in the play we write for ourselves; it is admired by others, doesn't make mistakes, is creative and effective in everything it sets out to do.

The true self is the bundle of mixed emotions, failures, successes, sins, longings, joys, sorrows that we know ourselves to be. It is whom Jesus died for. It is whom God knows and totally accepts. God doesn't know my false self for God didn't create it; I did.

Fortunately for us, God places our false self in a “blessed insecurity.” It is often unmasked when we experience failure or disappointment, when things just don't work out according to plan. God comes to us at these times, easing the pain of self-doubt by showing us who we really are and by accepting us completely.

God keeps no score of successes and failures. “I am content to rest as a child in her mother's arms” (Ps. 131). God has made each of us unique and special. As we grow in our relationship with God, we find our identity.

*Nancy Sprague works at a pregnancy distress center and is a member of an intentional community in Winnipeg.*



## Mysticism and the Inner Life: Three Book Reviews

**Mysticism: Its Meaning and Message.** Georgia Harkness. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973. Reviewed by Eleanor Loewen.

Harkness accomplishes two goals in this book. First, she clarifies what mysticism is and second, she introduces the reader to great figures of the past whose names may be well known but whose inner reactions may not be.

Part one discusses definitions and distinctions of mysticism, mysticism as found in the Bible, and philosophical grounds of mysticism. The definition I found most helpful was that mysticism

*is the very life of religion, for it enters in the communion of the human spirit with that Ultimate Ground of Reality on which our existence rests (p. 16).*

Further, Harkness says that

*mysticism in its truest form, even though it may be called simply personal prayer and worship, or the devotional life, or the "practice of the presence of God," or the strengthening of the inner life through communion with God, is a universal need of the religious life and is available to all of us (p. 16).*

She discusses the mysticism of Jesus and Paul, the latter being the first great Christian mystic. John's gospel is also considered mystical in that one finds the epitome of demands and fruits of an inward union with Christ and of outward service in his name.

When dealing with the philosophical grounds of mysticism, Harkness' greatest concern is to clear up the misconception held by people who identify mysticism with the occult, with clairvoyance, with astrology and supersition. It seemed to me that she achieved her goal in the discussion found in that chapter.

Part two provides the reader with a description and evaluation of the various types of mysticism. These include early and medieval mystics: St. Augustine, St. Bernard and St. Thomas; the Spanish mystics: Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross; the emergence of Protestant piety in Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jakob Boehme, Lancelot Andrewes, George Fox, and the Wesleys; and twentieth-century mystics: Frank Lubach, Kagawa, Teilhard de Chardin, and Dag Hammarskjöld.

The study is brought to date (1973) through Harkness' survey of some of the "neo-mysticisms": mysticism of the occult, the drug culture, Vendanta and yoga, Zen Buddhism, celebration, the Jesus movement, and speaking in tongues.

Although this book is scholarly in its approach, it is also readable. Persons looking for a concise discussion of mysticism in order to gain some understanding of the topic will find this book helpful. Parts one and two can stand separately, although I found it helpful to get the theoretical background and then see that theory applied to persons' lives in history.

Eleanor Loewen is education consultant for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada.

**The Feminist Mystic: and Other Essays on Women and Spirituality.** Mary E. Giles, ed. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982. Reviewed by Neoma Jantz.

Can a woman think complex thoughts about God? Without the help of man? Can she then integrate these thoughts into social and relational action? The six writers of this book say she can. They call her a *feminist mystic*.

The term sounds contradictory, suggests editor Mary Giles, but it is not. When women strive to be uniquely themselves, and are stripped of their dependencies on institutions and male-dominated theology—when they risk the journey into aloneness and listen for the music of an immediate encounter with God—they will then be equipped to lovingly enter a struggling world.

Two examples of such women are described in chapter one. Catherine of Siena, born 1347, showed an early spiritual inclination. She chose to spend three years in prayerful solitude and then began to serve the sick and poor. She was fearless in confrontation with pope and king. Her writings are passionate expressions of adoration.

Teresa of Avila (1515) entered the convent because of outward restraints and struggled with her ambivalence until, in a vision of Christ, she made her own commitment. This freed her for a wide ministry of counsel, reform, and writing. Both Catherine and Teresa nurtured their loving into actions which defied convention. Neither woman found her identity in a creed, structure or relationship, but in her own freedom to love and create.

In chapter two, Mary Giles pleads for the opportunity to claim her birthright—the intensity and scope of spirituality usually thought exclusive to theologians and the cloistered religious. She uses the example of St. John of the Cross, sixteenth-century mystic, who in his writing used the image of *night*. The journey into this night detaches one from what is known (secure, controlled) to what is unknown. It is a risky and painful trip.

In the third essay Meinrad Craighead describes her concept of Mothergod, with its admitted linguistic limitations. After fourteen years in a convent, Meinrad broke out of its confining structure with its insistence on a patriarchal Christianity. She sees herself as an authentic image of God which transcends the orthodox image of father.

Margaret Miles invites us to acknowledge and accept aloneness, especially in our society which sees our security, identity and worth only in terms of our relationships (wife, mother). This acceptance of aloneness gives us breathing space and helps define our purpose.

In the chapter on contemplation, Wendy Wright writes in a beautifully poetic style of her identification with the sacramental roles of Mary, mother of Jesus. At the same time the idea of the embodiment of masculinity/femininity on a psychological dimension is explored.

Finally, Kathryn Hohlwein writes about Simone Weil, twentieth-century mystic and activist. She had a great capacity for solitude and inwardness, yet an obsession for justice. In a chaotic time her devotion to Christ intensified.

This book takes an Anabaptist like myself into new territory. In fact I wonder if I can appreciate from where these writers are coming. Their struggle with the Catholic structure as a male-mediated religion makes me thankful for my own tradition with its emphasis on personal salvation and personal accountability.

One troubling gap seems to be the lack of a definition of authority. True, the journey inward is highly subjective, but what is the testing device? Rejecting the confining structure of church and community may mean freedom, but it may also leave the course too uncharted.

Trusting one's "visions" may be precarious. None of the writers refer to scriptures as the directive in contemplation. More striking is the absence of attention to the person and role of Jesus. Thus the focus is singularly inward-looking with overtones of the existential and psychological analysis of which some of us are growing wary.

Contrary to what the title may suggest, the book does not have an unbalanced feminist tone. The emphasis on the mystical experience dominates. All six writers are professors and write in finely-tuned styles, somewhat abstract but with microscopic clarity. It is provocative to look through their eyes.

*Neoma Jantz lives in Winnipeg, and has worked as a homemaker, teacher, and secretary.*

**The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation.** Morton T. Kelsey. New York: Paulist Press, 1976. Reviewed by Maurice Mierau.

"Our part" in meditation, writes Kelsey, "is mostly to accept the hand already stretched out to us." So my review will be mostly a summary of Kelsey's insight-filled and "essentially practical" book.

Kelsey draws a lot on the work of Carl Jung, beginning with his dictum that a person with no interest in religion, in the soul, is simply not a whole or healthy person. The way to health for the modern person, according to Kelsey's reading of psychology, is "for us to unlock the door and come out from the places most of us have been hiding."

Since Kelsey is also a Catholic priest, he shows the importance of mystics such as John of the Cross and Catherine of Siena to the practice of Christian meditation. While placing a heavy emphasis on the individual's encounter with God through various forms of

prayer, Kelsey also stresses that "the more deeply one knows humankind the more open one is to know God."

In the second part of the book, "The Basic Climate for Meditation," Kelsey gives a first definition: "the art of letting down the barrier that separates one's rational consciousness from the depth of one's soul."

While this reunion with one's own depth is very rewarding, Kelsey also warns that this inner way is a struggle, and can often be dangerous. "Not entering" it, however, is even more dangerous, and can result in psychological and physical illnesses that begin in "one's separation from that reality of which all living religion speaks."

At the beginning of his third section, "Preparations for the Inward Journey," Kelsey devotes a whole chapter to the use of time. He emphasizes that we should be priority-ruled rather than activity-ruled. Kelsey's list of priorities goes something like this: family, friends, "religious" life, work, leisure, sleep. He reflects that he does the best work when he is not striving to do it alone.

The fourth part of Kelsey's book is in many ways the crux of it, since it deals quite concretely with a method for Christian mediation. He observes that mystical experience is very difficult for the modern Christian to talk about, since we no longer admit the validity of language that goes beyond the realm of "rational" experience. Because of this Western distrust of mystical experience we have forgotten the importance of listening to our dreams. Apparently we have become too sophisticated to take the dream-images that occur below rational consciousness seriously.

The real issue, writes Kelsey, is not to classify certain experiences as either "religious" or "secular" but rather to assign them a "relative value" in the context of our whole lives. This kind of use of one's imaginative and emotional life "doesn't deny mind or rationality": it is a case of "both/and" rather than "either/or."

The book concludes with a section devoted to various story and poem passages—some of them adapted from the Bible—which can be used as aids to meditation. I would not hesitate to recommend either these "maps of the inner territory" or the whole book.

*Maurice Mierau is a poet and a student at the University of Winnipeg.*

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## More Resources

### Mennonite works cited:

- Baerg, Anna. *Journals* (1916-1927, 1959). Archives, Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg.  
Brenneman, Helen Good. *My Comforters*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1966.  
Cummings, Mary Lou, ed. *Full Circle*. Newton: Faith and Life, 1978.  
Wenger, J.C., ed. *They Met God*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1964.  
Wiebe, Katie Funk, ed. *Women Among the Brethren*. Hillsboro: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1979.

### Just released:

Rich, Elaine Sommers. *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness 1683-1983*. Scottdale, Herald Press, 1983. In the book's foreword, Barbara K. Reber says: "This record of 300 years of female Mennonite history in North America will be viewed as an important new beginning: a beginning in recognizing the significance of over half of the church's faithful workers." Chapter headings include: "wives," "mothers," "aunts," "in the home congregation," "in education," "in overseas missions," "in home missions," in healthcare ministries," "WMSC and its forerunners," Watch for a review later!

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### News and Verbs

**Mary Sprunger-Froese** and **Patricia McCormick** entered the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant in Colorado on Ash Wednesday to pray and to pour blood on crosses which bore the images of human faces. At this writing, the women are awaiting the setting of their trial date at Denver County Jail. Their address is Box 1108, Denver, CO. 80201.

**Vernon Leis**, a pastor in Kitchener, Ont., withdrew his name from nomination to the board of MCC (Canada) at the annual meeting in Saskatoon January 22. Vern explained to *Mennonite Reporter*: "I see it as an injustice not to have more women on the board. It's a justice issue and I feel deeply about this." A veteran board member, Vern was one of four nominees (two male, two female) for two at-large positions. He reasoned that since both male nominees were well known and came from the underrepresented Swiss Mennonite group in Ontario, it was likely that both men would be elected; if he withdrew, at least one woman would enter the board. Which is exactly what happened: **Irene Ewert Wiebe** of Saskatoon is now one of two women who sit on MCC (Canada's) 31-person board.

**Carol Beechy**, Cooperstown, NY is serving a six-month term as primary care physician at Shirati Hospital, Musoma, Tanzania with the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. Previously she was on staff at Bassett Memorial Hospital in Cooperstown, and was active in Physicians for Social Responsibility.

The February 1983 issue of *Gospel Evangel*, the Indiana-Michigan conference paper, includes an article by **Helen Good Brenneman**, "**Rachel Fisher**, a Woman in Ministry." Rachel is associate minister at College Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN.

**Harriet Bicksler**, Harrisburg, PA edits the quarterly "Peace and Justice Newsletter" for the Commission on Peace and Social Concerns of the Brethren in Christ church. A section of this newsletter called "The Alabaster Jar" focuses on women's issues. The winter 1983 edition includes a review by Arlene Miller of the book *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism and Traditionalism* by Kari Torjesen Malcom (InterVarsity Press, 1982).

### On Women as Mystics:

Byrum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1982.

*Classics of Western Spirituality* series. New York: Paulist Press. New translations of Christian classics. See especially:

Catherine of Siena: *The Dialogue*, ed. Suzanne Noffke, 1980.

Julian of Norwich: *Showings*, ed. Edmund Colledge, 1978.

Teresa of Avila: *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 1979.

Weil, Simone, *Gateway to God*. Glasgow: Collins, 1974. *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper, 1973.

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Women students at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Ont., have organized a "Women-in-Ministry Day" March 25 for women seminarians and ordained women clergy. The planning committee includes **Gloria Martin Eby**, one of about a dozen female Mennonite students at WLS.

*Wish and Wonder* by **Elsa Redekopp** is a fictional account of customs, traditions and spiritual values in Southern Manitoba Mennonite villages, published by Christian Press in 1982.

"Pocket posters" for sharing the *Report* with others are still available from the MCC Akron office. Appropriate for church or school libraries, bulletin boards, MCC SELFHELP or thrift shops, offices, bookstores, etc.

**Bertha Beachy**, Goshen, IN, has accepted appointment as representative of the Committee on Women's Concerns to MCC Peace Section.

Lindale Mennonite Church near Harrisonburg, VA is sponsoring a study on "Wholeness in Sexuality" during the Sunday school hours from February 6 to May 15. Topics of the sessions are: "Sexuality, Sensuality, Sexism, Sex: The God Idea," "Becoming All We're Meant to Become (Male/Female Roles)," "To Be or Not to Be Married (Singleness and Celibacy)," "Sex Education in the Christian Home," "Choosing a Partner—What to Look For," "Engagement: Growing toward Intimacy," "I Do: A Commitment for Life," "Beyond Marketplace Sexuality," "Being Caring and Responsible," "Healing in Homosexuality," "Sexual Healing: Single Again (Widowhood and Divorce)," and "Celebrating the Mystery."

**Susan M. Baldauf** is executive director for program and promotion for the May 25-28 Conference on the Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age, to be held in Pasadena, CA. Called by and for evangelical Christians, the event will provide a forum for various perspectives. Numerous other women are among the seventy workshop leaders. To register, write to C.P.N.A., 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, CA, 91104.

"Peace for All Seasons," a broadside of six poems prepared for a Nebraska MCC sale by **Muriel Thiessen Stackley**, has been included in *Disarmament Catalog*, edited by Murray Polner (Pilgrim Press, 1982). Copies of the broadside—illustrated by young Javan Stackley—

are available for \$1.00 each from Muriel, 4830 Woodland Ave., Lincoln, NE 68516.

**Neva Lou Hershberger** of Wellman, IA, is chairperson of a committee appointed to write the history of the Iowa-Nebraska Mennonite Conference (MC).

The Canadian government led ten other delegations, including the U.S., Chile and New Zealand, in successfully introducing in the UN's Third Committee (which examines social, humanitarian and cultural matters) a resolution that "notes with concern that women are still not represented on an equitable basis with men in decision-making positions in a majority of national and international institutions." The resolution—titled "Women in Public Life" and approved later by the General Assembly—calls on UN member states to "make special efforts" by the end of the UN Decade for Women (1985) to nominate and appoint women on an equal basis with men (from "Global Negotiations Action Notes" Jan. 7, 1983).

**Karen Neufeld**, associate professor of teacher education at Tabor College, has authored a computer software package entitled "Computertronics." Education students will use it with a microcomputer to learn the phonics they will need to teach reading to children.

**June Alliman Yoder's** one-woman show, "With a Passion for Peace," includes dramatic material on Old Testament midwives, Sojourner Truth, and Mother Teresa. June has been touring various Mennonite colleges this winter and spring as the 1982-83 C. Henry Smith Peace Lecturer.

"The Biblical Theme of Male-Female Equality," a pamphlet by **Virginia R. Mollenkott**, is available free from Gal. 3:28 Press, P.O. Box 14126, Albuquerque, NM 87191.

**Ruth Boehm**, St. Jacobs, Ont., will be one of two moderators at the Bethlehem '83 North American

Mennonite Youth Gathering in August. A grade 13 student at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, Ruth is also president of the Inter-Mennonite Youth Fellowship of Ontario.

**Elizabeth Thieszen**, rector of Colegio Americas Unidas in Cali, Colombia, for the past eleven years, says that the 450-student school may have to shut down because of a steady shortfall of income. The major institution of the Colombian Mennonite Brethren churches has, says teacher **Emparatriz Aguelar**, both an evangelistic and social function. Principle **Evangeline Ibarquen** says that the school is vital to the mission of the church.

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## Letters

I would like for you to know that I really like to read the *Report*. Thanks for preparing such an outstanding paper. I'd like to have an issue dedicated to the impact of children/childlessness on women's lives.

Do women feel that marriage without children is "justified"?—by that I mean do they feel that the Lord's command to replenish the earth has/hasn't been fulfilled? Do they feel that they've had children even though they'd rather not have? Do children really enrich a marriage? Are Mennonite women waiting longer (until they're in their late 20's or 30's) to have children?

I feel sure that Mennonite women, because they are taking stands on so many issues nowadays are also not just having children just because of the traditionally large families of their parents and grandparents.—**Kathy Reed Barker, Lexington, KY.**

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If you have news and verbs that you would like to share with the other 2,000 readers of *Report*, send them to Sue Clemmer Steiner, Apt. 3, 87 Westmount Rd. North, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 5G5 Canada.

The *REPORT* is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Sue Clemmer Steiner, Apt. 3, 87 Westmount Rd. North, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 5G5 Canada.

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